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SPANNING THE GULF:

EMPATHY, DIALOGUE, AND HARMONY IN EXPLORING LITERATURE OF DIVERSITY

[Murray McCowen Sellers](#)

Any beachcomber can tell you how vast and consequential a “gulf” can be. When I lived in Florida and spent many happy times on the beautiful Gulf of Mexico, I would often refer to it as the *ocean* because, gazing out over its expansive waters, I felt the same sense of wonder and respect that I felt for the Atlantic on Florida’s opposite shore.

A *gulf*, though, has its own definition. It’s a large area of an ocean that is, to some extent, protected—partially enclosed by land. Although it’s not nearly as vast as an ocean, it can certainly seem to be, for another definition of a gulf is an *abyss*. Figuratively speaking, it is often used to refer to a great separating distance—a wide gap.

Although our own classes do reflect a closed—even protected—space, they, too, can represent “a great, separating distance,” “a gap,” even an abyss. No matter how small our classroom space or how few our students, I’m sure that all of us have, at times, perceived a kind of gulf—between our students and ourselves, between our students and each other, even within our individual students as they can be separated from the true nature of their own thoughts and feelings. And yet, there are those magical times when that gulf seems virtually nonexistent. No matter the size of the classroom or the number of students, we find we are communicating and understanding—that we are bridging the gaps and building connections that span that gulf.

Everybody enjoys spanning the gulf that separates us as individuals. But that gulf—between our backgrounds, our experiences, our priorities, our essential points of view—is not always easy to span. So how do we connect—especially as we read and relate to literature that evokes so many strong differences of opinion, insight, and

emotional response? I believe that, in the classroom, "spanning the gulf" of *diversity* is best achieved through empathy, dialogue, and harmony.

One of the most fascinating paradoxes is that of likeness and difference in the ways that individuals view the world. How often in a spirited class discussion do we—and our students—share what seem to be initially similar reactions—only to admit later that we *do* have some notable differences in our points of view? Yet, as instructors, we want our students to share their fascinatingly individual viewpoints—and, through this sharing, to celebrate the diversity of their perceptions.

One of the challenges of every literature instructor is to help “span the gulf” between individuals and thus foster collegial communication. Different venues of teaching call for different approaches. This was my first year of teaching English at a small state university. Many of our 3,000 students haven't spent too much time outside the state of South Carolina. “So where's the gulf?” you might ask. Well, it results, in general, from some out-of-state and out-of-country students and, in particular, from a racial mix of approximately 30% African-American students (in some individual classes, closer to 50%) and from an entire student population which exhibits marked diversity in economic, social, and educational demographics. When I chose “Growing Up in the South” as the unifying theme for my 200-level literature class, I knew that the majority of my students had done just that! But just as they had very different individual experiences in this process, I knew that they would react quite differently to the diversity of books I chose for them to read: Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*, John Grisham's *A Painted House*, Pat Conroy's *The Water is Wide*, and Dori Sanders' *Clover*. How could I orchestrate a class of thirty-five students (not English majors, but members of a required General Education course) into a symphonic harmony of divergent, but admirable, complementary notes?

I began my task with fostering a class-wide recognition of each *individual* student, which led to the important development of empathy among those individuals. Early on, I introduced the students to the concept that the so-called “literature of universality,” though it may (by definition) appeal to large numbers of people in a variety of locations over a great expanse of time, is still—always and forever— assimilated by unique individuals. And these individuals all approach a text with *pre-texts*—knowledge, experience, and emotions—that they bring to a particular text each time they read it. A reader of Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*, for example, may or may not know certain things about New Orleans, about small-town Mississippi in the 1960's, and/or about detached retinas. This reader may or may not have experienced moving from a small town in the South to a big city in the North—and then returning to the South—and/or may or may not have first-hand knowledge of a stepparent (particularly as an only child). He or she may or may not be an optimist. This reader may or may not feel kindly toward a book with a majority of female characters. Whatever their pre-texts, my students learned to recognize and make use of them as they followed their on-going assignment of recording their impressions, analyses, and insights on the assigned reading selections and bringing their reading journals to class discussions. They also learned about the plethora of possible individual responses to the question I asked at the beginning of each class session—“Okay, what puzzled you? Caught your attention and made you think? Even *grabbed* you about today's reading assignment?” My students first learned to *listen* to the reactions of each other—and then the dialogue began.

Cooperative learning in a class of thirty-five? With lots of (sometimes stationary) desks in an over-crowded room and with college students who come to class prepared to merely take notes—not to interact with strangers? Yes, it can work! Toward the middle of the semester—after the students had come to know each other better and to accept the diversity of divergent opinions—they signed up to work with one of the books not yet discussed—*A Painted House*, *The Water is Wide*, or *Clover*. After viewing their preferences, I assigned each to one of the three groups. Although the whole class was supposed to read all of the books, students in each particular focus group were responsible for picking out what they considered to be the salient parts of each day's assignment when we read “their” book and enlightening the class with their ideas. Group members used empathy and dialogue to establish a particular blend of harmony in their presentations. Probably because they were student-generated—and because they encompassed so much diversity of opinion—these presentations sparked lively discussions that fostered even deeper learning.

You probably noticed that the literature I selected itself represented much diversity—of time periods, of purpose and focus, of style—and, yes, of both African-American and Caucasian viewpoints. In a class where honest empathy and frank dialogue had been established early on—along with interest in, respect for, and celebration of the viewpoints of others—I noticed that students were admirably comfortable with discussing issues of stereotyping, prejudice, and exclusion. I think it is important to note that we did not categorize these issues as “Black” or “White.” Rather, following Zora Neale Hurston (the author of the first book we read), we viewed them as the concern—and responsibility of *all* people. Through empathy and dialogue, the class grew to understand not only each other but also the writers, characters, and time periods of the literature we read. And they learned that this understanding is the first and most important step toward harmony .

For their end-of-semester “long” paper, the students combined the elements of unity and diversity in their choice of a particular focus that brought together any two of the books we studied. The topics were student-generated and based on a connection that they saw between the two works. One student, for example, considered the impact of a stepmother on Laurel in *The Optimist's Daughter* and on Clover in the book that bears her name. One compared the influence of a rural/farming environment in *As I Lay Dying* and in *A Painted House*. One explored the effect of prejudice in *Dust Tracks on a Road* and in *The Water is Wide*. They learned a lot about the books, and they learned a lot about empathy, dialogue, and harmony. As one student so aptly described her insights as she summarized the reading selections on her final exam, “No matter how different the circumstances and culture are, one should always make an attempt to understand others' points of view. ‘My culture may not be your culture,’ but there is no reason why we can't make it work.”

Murray McCowen Sellers (msellers@lander.edu) was born in Macon, Georgia and received a BA in English from Florida Southern College (Lakeland, FL), an M.Ed. in English from Armstrong Atlantic State University (Savannah, GA), and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Florida. Her major concentration at UF was in 18th Century British Literature with a focus on the rise of the novel. Her dissertation explored the role of the narrator in Fielding's *Tom Jones*. She has taught in both public and private high schools, including an eight-year appointment at an international boarding school for students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. In the secondary setting, she has taught both British and American literature. She received an NEH grant to participate in a seminar on the writings of Swift and Twain and that led to a paper entitled "Incorporating Comedy and Satire in the Classroom" at the Tennessee Council of Teachers of English Convention. She also presented "Creative Catalysts for Energizing Writing" at the annual convention of the Florida Council of Independent Schools. At several public colleges and universities she has taught composition and literature. In addition to her presentation at CEA in April, she presented "Vision and Re-Vision: The Goal of Clear-Sighted Writing" at the annual Conference on English Pedagogy at Claflin University in 2006.

She has been Assistant Professor of English at Lander University in Greenwood, SC since August 2006. There she teaches composition and literature courses and also instructs and supervises the English teacher candidates. Her current areas of interest include writing in all forms, Southern literature, American short fiction, and the preparation of English teachers.

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